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ABSTRACT

"Variety" is defined as a "unique configuration of linguistic features." These features characterize the language of conversation, unscripted commentary, religion, newspaper reporting, and legal documents. Everyone learns many varieties of at least one language. The ambiguity of usage labels like "slang" and "colloquial" indicates that we know very little about the full range of non-linguistic features which motivate certain vocabulary choices. To tell a foreign student of English that a word is "colloquial" or "slang" is to tell him nothing. He needs to know sets of words which are appropriate and inappropriate in the same contexts. Our notions of phonological and grammatical features in terms of language variations are even vaguer. Although modern texts usually claim to stress patterns which are realistic and adapted to current needs, a student may never be exposed to actual samples of language in use. The fact that the varieties of English we listen to and read are not necessarily the ones we speak or write suggests that language texts should illustrate more often than they do spoken and written English which would be natural for the student to use productively. It also suggests that there is a need for drills in which he is asked to change a spoken or written text from a variety he would normally read or listen to into one he might actually speak or write. (AMM)

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Varieties of English

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In Investigating English Style Crystal and Davy distinguish between two sets of linguistic features, those characterized by "...their insusceptibility to variation in most situations..."[1] and those "...which correlate with the distinctiveness of a situation..."[2] and are hence manipulable by the user. As examples of the first, they cite the linguistic features which mark regional and class dialects, idiosyncratic speech and writing habits, and those which reveal either the time period a given language sample represents or the stage in linguistic development a particular user happens to have reached. Features of the second type, those which are susceptible to variation, have received scant attention; and it is Crystal and Davy's purpose to suggest a theoretical framework within which they may be identified and their correlation with particular social contexts determined. In this view, a variety of a language is "...a unique configuration of linguistic features."[3] To demonstrate what they mean by a variety of a language, the authors consider the linguistic features which characterize the language of conversation, unscripted commentary, religion, newspaper reporting and legal documents.

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Each of us learns many varieties of at least one language; and in some cultures it is usual for at least some groups to learn different varieties of more than one language. This fact was interestingly alluded to by the French Canadian playwright Michel

Tremblay when, in a recent interview, he said, "My work reflects the language of the people. Even while I am speaking to you I am translating from Joual into academic French. When I speak to myself I speak in Joual."[4] In what follows the emphasis will be on the varieties of English Crystal and Davy describe, those which correlate with distinctive situations,since it is just these "manipulable" varieties which are apt to be ignored in the language classroom.

In a general way, we are all aware of some of the differences which set one variety of English apart from some other. Vocabulary comes immediately to mind, especially words associated with particular occupations. But the ambiguity of usage labels like slang and colloquial indicates that we know very little about the full range of non-linguistic features which motivate certain vocabulary choices. What, for example, determines the use of first names, last names, nicknames, titles, forms of address for people we don't know, forms of address used with children and those thought appropriate for adults. Honey may be appropriate between husband and wife, accepted, though perhaps disliked, when used by an adult speaking to a young child,[5] and faintly irritating, even insulting, when used by a waitress to address a female customer in a tea room. To tell a foreign student that this word is colloquial or slang is to tell him nothing. Presumably, it belongs to a set of words which are appropriate and inappropriate in the same contexts, and this is what the student needs to know.

In a still vaguer way, we are aware that phonological features may mark different varieties. Sermons, weather reports, newscasts, Hollywood's notion of a sex goddess, the distinctive way in which some

adults,often teachers, address small children are ready examples. A newscaster has merely to say the name of a famous person for the hearer to know that he is about to announce that person's death not, say, that he has just won the Nobel prize or been sent to jail.

When we come to grammatical features, our notion of language variation is perhaps vaguest of all. Asked to predict some of the main differences between the syntax of a casual conversation and a scholarly article, many people might go no further than to mention that the conversation would probably have lots of short, simple sentences, while the article would be full of long, complicated ones. But they would probably not be prepared to say what they meant by "short and simple" or "long and complicated." Others, while ignoring the variety of English represented by a scholarly article, would simply assert that casual conversation is ungrammatical. Since this has been maintained by some professional linguists,[6] as well as by the untrained observer, it leaves the English teacher, who has often been told to stress the spoken language, especially conversation, in an unenviable position.

The interdependence of phonological (or for written language, orthographic) grammatical and lexical features is even less known than each of these dimensions of language variation considered separately. It is, however, easy to illustrate such interdependence. In The Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield, in describing a movie he has seen, says:

> He's a very bitter guy, the brother, because he was a doctor in the war and now he can't operate any more because his nerves are shot, so he boozes all the time, but he's pretty witty and all.[7]

If we change the grammatical structure so as to make it appropriate to, say, a psychiatrist's report on the brother, some of the vocabulary seems completely out of place, though we can imagine just what vocabulary changes would be needed:

> The brother, who was a doctor in the war, is a very bitter guy, owing to the fact that, his nerves having been shot, he can not operate any more, for which reason he boozes all the time, remaining, however, pretty witty and all.

With appropriate vocabulary changes, it might read as follows:

> The brother, who was a physician during the war, is a most embittered individual, owing to the fact that, his psychoneurological responses having been impaired, he can no longer perform operations, for which reason he regularly consumes alcohol in excessive quantities, remaining, however, reasonably well-adapted socially.

While it is true that we have very little precise information on situationally-determined language variation, it is nonetheless true that applying what little we do know can be of help in teaching better English now. First, by helping us to define our goals more precisely. The objectives of many language texts are stated approximately as follows: To teach the student to understand and produce the major patterns of standard (American?) English. This is a nebulous goal.

Reflection on the many varieties of English might lead us to ask the following questions, among others: (1) Will the learner ever be called on to speak the language? If yes, under what circumstances, for what purpose, on what topics? Will there be other participants? What will his relations to these participants be? (2) Will he ever read the language? If yes, what will he read? Textbooks? Poetry?

Newspapers? Instruction manuals? Highway signs? Recipes? (3) Will he ever listen to the language? If yes, what? Movies? Plays? Lectures? Newscasts? Folk songs? (4) Will he ever write the language? Personal letters? Job application forms? Business letters? Short stories? Abstracts? Research reports? Crystal and Davy make a statement which sums up the whole problem of adequate course design:

> ...the foreigner...has no intuitive sense of linguistic appropriateness in English at all: he has no awareness of conventions of conformity, because he has not grown up in the relevant linguistic climate. He knows only what he has been taught in language lessons. Hence it is important the syllabus for foreign language teaching should be so ordered that it includes instruction in those varieties of English that he will be likely to meet and need most frequently. Some courses attempt to do this, for example those which aim to provide a "tourist" English, and no more, or a "written English for scientists"; but the process can be carried much further and done more systematically. If a foreigner hopes to come to an English-speaking culture, then, he should not be in the position of having to make use of one variety of English in all situations, as so often happens.[8]

Now it is perhaps unwise to suggest that the student should never be exposed to varieties for which he neither has nor can project a need. After all, competence in a given variety may reveal to him uses of that variety which he could not otherwise have foreseen. On the other hand, where there is no apparent correlation between his present or anticipated uses of the language, and the language samples in the text he is using, surely the text cannot be expected to meet his particular requirements, however admirable it may be. Much improvement in English teaching in Quebec might be effected if there were adequate surveys of the occasions on

which different groups of French Canadians actually use English, either productively or receptively, and the occasions when inability to use English is, in some sense, a hindrance. Such surveys might suggest that it is poor strategy to insist that all French Canadians study English or that those who do, even when they are first learning the language, can profitably be expected to use the same text.

Once we have stated our goals more precisely, we are in a far better position to evaluate textbooks and other language teaching materials. Obviously, a first question is whether or not the materials purport to teach the requisite varieties of English; then, if they do, how efficiently they may be expected to help reach the stated objectives. Suppose, for example, that we wish to teach vocabulary which represents certain contemporary varieties of spoken English. If we do, we will know to look with a skeptical eye on texts which have based vocabulary selection on the Thorndike-Lorge word list, even though this list was based on a count of millions of words. A. Hood Roberts in A Statistical Linguistic Analysis of American English noted that literary and learned words, many not recent, some even archaic, predominate. "Perhaps the best indication of the learned quality of the sample," he says, "is that ibid. is recorded as one of the 2,000 most frequent words."[9]

Turning to grammatical patterns, it can be helpful, by way of illustration, to consider a construction almost every student will be taught, the passive voice. Often, drills on the passive are transformational, that is, the student is asked to change an active sentence to a passive one. Yet a comprehensive study by Jan Svartvik

has shown that in actual texts, drawn from a number of different varieties of English, 80% of all passives are agentless, and that in the remaining instances the agents were, on an average, twice as long as the subjects of active sentences.[10] This means that the cue sentences or the responses, or both, in a transformational drill are likely to be improbable in any variety English.

If we then ask where passives are likely to occur, we may be surprised to discover that the ones we have been teaching are unrepresentative. Thus Svartvik found that in speech there were, on an average, 6.5 passive constructions per thousand words, whereas in plays, which are sometimes assumed to quite accurately approximate speech, the average number of occurrences was significantly less, 1.2 occurrences per thousand words. He also found that passives were more than three times as frequent in scientific writing and a little more than twice as frequent in news reporting than they were in speech.[11] Yet only some of our students read either variety and an even smaller percentage would ever write English of this kind.

Where we do not have information like that in Svartvik's study, we can at least ask ourselves where certain phonological, grammatical and lexical patterns might reasonably be expected to occur. Suppose, for example, that we wish to teach pre-noun modification, primarily by adjectives but also by other parts of speech like verbs and nouns. Where might we expect to easily find many examples? One source is book and movie reviews. Thus, in the space of less than two columns of a recent issue of The New Yorker book review section,[12] there were 41 such phrases, illustrating modification by verbs (the foremost

LIVING Authority, a PLEASING experience, far-REACHING impact, to name a few), by nouns (MOVIE reviews, a rather nasty HEALTH-FOOD business), and by adjectives (phrases like a RICH and FLUENT book, a DETESTABLE forty-five-year-old bachelor, an AGREEABLE decorum). In this sample at least, modification by nouns or verbs was as frequent as modification by adjectives. Predictably, modification by more than one part of speech was quite common, although one of the examples, an automated, computerized, coast-to-coast chain of packaged-chicken-dinner establishments, seems to be atypical.

What about two noun phrases syntactically linked by a preposition? Book titles, especially novels, are an excellent source: Intruder in the Dust, A Death in the Family, Lord of the Flies. Or, take adjectives linked by a preposition to a noun phrase? Advertisements come immediately to mind: Good to the last drop, kind to your hands, chic in the air-conditioned luxury of a plush resort hotel.

Imperatives? Is their classroom use with small children - Raise your hand, go to the blackboard, stand up, sit down - at all representative of the situations in which an adult foreigner would use the imperative? Some more plausible contexts are highway signs, recipes, instructions for filling out forms, and directions. Interestingly, all but directions are restricted to the written medium, though most textbook drills on imperatives are oral.

It is a curious fact that, although modern texts usually claim to stress patterns which are realistic and adapted to current needs, a student may never be exposed to actual samples of language in use. Perhaps he will be allowed to read extracts from a few varieties of

written English, though they may have been "simplified", where simplification means that words from the Thorndike-Lorge list have replaced some of the original vocabulary. Ironically, this may confront the student with words he is even less likely to know or need than the ones in the unaltered text. Similarly, at a time when "oral English" is very likely to be stressed, a student may never be allowed to participate in a conversation more realistic than a textbook dialogue.

A consideration of language variation may also lead us to question some assumed fundamentals of language teaching. It has often been said that students should only be asked to say what they have first listened to, and write what they have first read. But one wonders if this dogma should be uncritically accepted. Much of the English we listen to - newscasts, lectures, movies - is quite unrepresentative of the varieties of English we would speak. We may, for example, have occasion to talk about the day's news, perhaps over a cup of coffee with a friend, and information from a newscast might be the basis for our discussion. Yet we would be thought queer indeed if we used, in our conversation, the syntax appropriate to a newscast. Similarly, only some of what we read represents a variety of English we would also write. Most of us have occasion to see movies and to talk about them or perhaps describe them in a letter; few of us write movie reviews.

The fact that the varieties of English we listen to and read are not necessarily the ones we speak or write suggests that language texts should illustrate more often than they do spoken and written

English it would be natural for the student to use productively. It also suggests that there is a need for drills in which he is asked to change a spoken or written text from a variety he would normally read or listen to into one he might actually speak or write. Thus, he could be asked to read an editorial on air pollution and talk about it with a friend, or listen to an interview and write a letter describing it.

Looking at language as subsuming many distinctive varieties can also make us more cautious in pronouncing a certain form to be "good" or "bad", "correct" or "incorrect". An idea occurred Mary is presumably ungrammatical in any variety of English; we don't have none, grammatical in dialects which, because they mark the user as belonging to a certain social class, we do not want the student to learn. But what about such shibboleths as like and as? Medium, spoken or written, seems to be the determining factor here. Bryant reports that like occurs as a conjunction in both spoken and informal written English, whereas in newspaper and magazine reporting as predominates.[13]

As we learn more and more about determinants of language variation, we shall probably find that very few questions of language use can be resolved in terms of acceptability in the black and white way in which this is presently often understood. In the meantime, those of us who teach can make a serious effort to systematically observe "manipulable" varieties of English. Along the way, we will hopefully develop a sensitivity to differing norms of linguistic appropriateness which we can effectively communicate to our students.

Footnotes

1. Crystal, David and Derek Davy. Investigating English Style, London and Harlow: Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., 1969. p. 68.

2. Ibid., p. 83.

3. Ibid., p. 82.

4. Richmond, John. "Ici On Parle Francais?", The Montreal Star, Sat., March 7, 1970. p. 43.

5. In How Children Fail (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1964. p. 174), John Holt reports that when he asked some young children what names they hated to be called about half were so-called terms of endearment.

6. For example, Chomsky and Halle have stated that, "The child is presented with certain 'primary linguistic data', data which are, in fact, highly restricted and degraded in quality. On the basis of these data, he constructs a grammar that defines his language and determines the phonetic and semantic interpretation of an infinite number of sentences. This grammar constitutes his knowledge of his language. It will, in particular, specify that the primary linguistic data are, in large measure, ill-formed, inappropriate and contrary to linguistic rule." Chomsky, Noam and Morris Halle. The Sound Pattern of English, New York: Harper and Row, 1968. pp. 330-331.

7. Salinger, J. D. The Catcher in the Rye, New York: Signet Books, 1961. p. 126.

8. Crystal and Davy, op. cit., p. 7.

9. Roberts, A. Hood. A Statistical Linguistic Analysis of American English, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966. p. 23.

10. Svartvik, Jan. On Voice in the English Verb, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966. p. 141.

11. Ibid., p. 155.

12. The New Yorker, Feb. 21, 1970. p. 128.

13. Bryant, Margaret. Current American Usage, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1962. pp. 133-135